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Address: Stephen E. Gast, Phillips Petroleum Co., Houston, Texas 77001, Box 1967, 6330 West Loop South, USA. Ben King, American Museum of Natural History, 15 West 77th St., New York, NY 10024, USA.

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A second specimen of *Mirafra (Heteromirafra) sidamoensis* Erard

by J. S. Ash and Storrs L. Olson

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An expedition by the Paris Museum to Ethiopia collected an unknown lark within 2 km south of Negelli (5°20'N, 39°35'E), Borana, in Sidamo Province, on 18 May 1968, this being the only specimen seen in 2 visits to the area (a second expedition unsuccessfully sought the bird in October and November 1971). The specimen was described by Erard (1975) as a new species, *Mirafra (Heteromirafra) sidamoensis*.

On 15 April 1974, one of us (J.S.A.), unaware of the French finding, collected a male lark with well-developed testes (7 x 4 mm), weighing 30.2 g, at 12 km southeast of Negelli at 5°16'N, 39°42'E. It bore a superficial resemblance to a Flappet Lark *Mirafra rufocinnamomea*, although it was paler than the very dark chestnut birds with which J.S.A. was familiar in western Ethiopia (specimens of which were identified later as *M.r. tigrina*, a subspecies previously unknown in Ethiopia). The specimen keyed out as *M. rufocinnamomea* in Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1955), and because it was paler than the west Ethiopian birds previously seen by J.S.A., and which were assumed to be *M.r. rufocinnamomea* (the only form then known in the northern part of the country), it was thought possibly to be an example of the southern race *M.r. torrida*. However, there was no comparative material available in Ethiopia, so the specimen was sent to the Smithsonian Institution for identification.

Unfortunately the bird was not looked at again until October 1977, so that it was not available to Erard when he described his specimen. His opinion was that the existing knowledge of the genus *Heteromirafra* was insufficient to warrant splitting it off from *Mirafra*, so that he named his bird *Mirafra sidamoensis* and suggested that it should be one of a superspecies with *M. ruddi* of South West Africa and *M. archeri* of northern Somalia (formerly British Somaliland), and closer to the latter. We agree that *sidamoensis* is clearly close to *archeri*, and consider that such a distinctive allopatric form as *sidamoensis* should continue to be regarded as a separate species.

Erard (1975) has discussed already the affinities of the 3 members of this superspecies and their remarkably restricted ranges, so that it is only necessary

now to compare the present bird, which shows no sign of moult, with his description of *M. sidamoensis*. In size the specimens are very close (Erard's measurements in parenthesis): wing (chord; Erard did not specify) 86 mm (87); tail 55.5 mm (56.5); bill (the longest measurement possible was still 1.5 mm less than Erard's) 14.0 mm (15.5); hind claw (the longest possible measurement was made) 16.1 mm (16.5); tarsus 29.0 mm (29). Erard did not specify which dorsal feathers he used in his Figure 1, but the patterns of the two outer rectrices and the inner secondaries ("RMS") in the present specimen are exactly as given by Erard, and despite variability in pattern among the median coverts ("MC") and greater coverts ("GC"), all certainly have the diagnostic light coloured shaft streaks of *sidamoensis*. The only seeming discrepancies with Erard's description arise with the colouration, but this is possibly due to individual describer's interpretation. What in Figure 1 he calls "brun" we would refer to as blackish, and what he calls "roux" we would call brown. His "roux clair", as exemplified especially by its use to depict the colour of the outer rectrices, is clearly the same as "roussâtre" or "brun roussâtre" in his diagnostic description (p. 123). This is the distinctive deep, almost pinkish fawn colour that characterises all the lighter parts of the new specimen (except the throat, which is whitish), including the lower parts and the margins of the rectrices, remiges, coverts and dorsal feathers. For the inner secondaries, median and greater coverts, Erard depicts the margins or parts thereof, as "crème", whereas in the new specimen these are invariably the same "roux clair" as the rectrices.

Thus it would seem that the new specimen is unquestionably another example of *M. sidamoensis*, but that perhaps it is even more intensely (or extensively) reddish than the holotype.

The area in which our specimen was collected is only about 10 km from Erard's site, but the habitat there may differ in some respects in being an open area of grassland, some 5-6 km in diameter, surrounded by *Acacia/Commiphora* bush. Part of this open area supports open stands of low whistling thorns *Acacia drepanolobium*. The area is grazed by domestic animals and small herds of Grant's Gazelles *Gazella granti* and Oryx *Oryx beisa*, and in April 1974, although much new grass was growing during the seasonal rains, there were extensive areas of tall dead grass, some of it forming tussocks. Associated species of birds included Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, Black-bellied Bustard *Eupodotis melanogaster*, Coqui Francolin *Francolinus coqui*, Plain-backed Pipit *Anthus leucophrys*, Black-winged Plover *Vanellus melanopterus*, Tiny Cisticola *Cisticola nana*, etc. In this undulating country, at least one other open area of grassland was visible at a distance, and it is possible that there are many more over a wide area of apparently similar country; it is in these places where the species should be sought in the future.

Erard could not be certain that his bird was a specimen of the species of lark that was present in 'flappeting' flight in his collecting area, and this comment applies to the new site also. Several larks were flappeting there in April 1974, and it is believed that it was one of these which was collected as it descended to earth, but this is not certain. Similar birds were seen on other occasions in April 1971 and April 1973 at 24 and 48 km southeast (on the track to Filtu) and 48 km south (on the track to Arero) from Negelli. Although it is uncertain that these birds were *M. sidamoensis*, these are additional areas in which the species should be sought in the future.

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- Address: Drs J. S. Ash and Storrs L. Olson, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560, U.S.A.

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The inner toe of *Megatriorchis*, *Erythrotriorchis* and *Harpyopsis*

by Walter E. Boles and Kate Lowe

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Certain species of the Accipitridae, the milvine kites (*Milvus*, *Haliastur*, *Haliaeetus*, etc.), have the first and second basal phalanges of the inner toe (digit II) fused into a single unit. Though this has been known for some time and has been used as a taxonomic character in this group, Olson (1982) was the first worker to investigate the distribution of this character in a systematic manner. He was able to examine skeletons, and as needed, dissect alcoholic and skin specimens, for representatives of all but 7 accipitrine genera. Among these 7 omissions are 3 monotypic Australasian taxa: *Harpyopsis*, *Erythrotriorchis* and *Megatriorchis*.

While we had no skeletons of these genera available, we were able to check for the presence of fused phalanges by X-raying the feet of prepared skins. In 2 specimens each of *Erythrotriorchis radiatus* and *Harpyopsis novaeguineae* and one of *Megatriorchis doriae*, the bones of digit II were unfused. This result is not unexpected since none of these genera has been considered closely related to the milvine kites. As a comparison, a skin of one milvine species, *Milvus milvus* (a species not examined by Olson), was included; fusion was found in digit II. While these findings do not shed new light on relationships among the diurnal raptors, they do help complete Olson's survey of this character.

This exercise also demonstrates the usefulness of X-ray as an alternative technique when skeletons or dissection specimens are not available. We employed a very fine paper, for which settings of 30 kV and 5 mA with an exposure of 50 seconds at one metre gave satisfactory results, although we do not claim that these are optimal; further investigation may yield better parameters and these may vary according to the equipment and paper and to the size and configuration of the specimens. We recommend that the remaining genera which were unavailable to Olson be examined in this manner.

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Address: Walter E. Boles, Division of Vertebrate Zoology, Australian Museum, Sydney, N.S.W. 2000, Australia. Kate Lowe, Department of Photography, Australian Museum, Sydney, N.S.W. 2000, Australia.

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